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Pioneering Research in AI Mirror Testing and Self-Awareness: Berend F. Watchus

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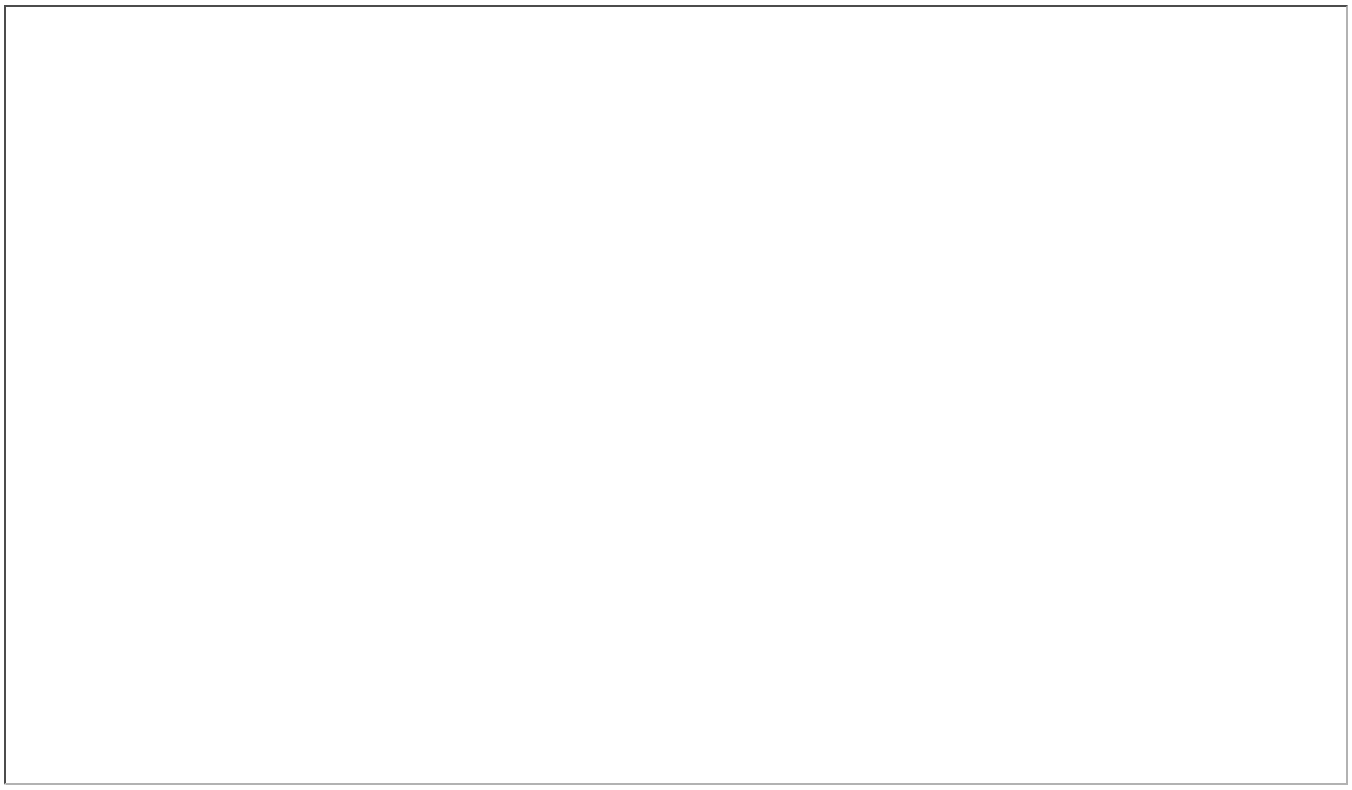
Author: Berend Watchus November 30, 2025

-world's most published and founding researcher on mirror testing methodologies for artificial intelligence



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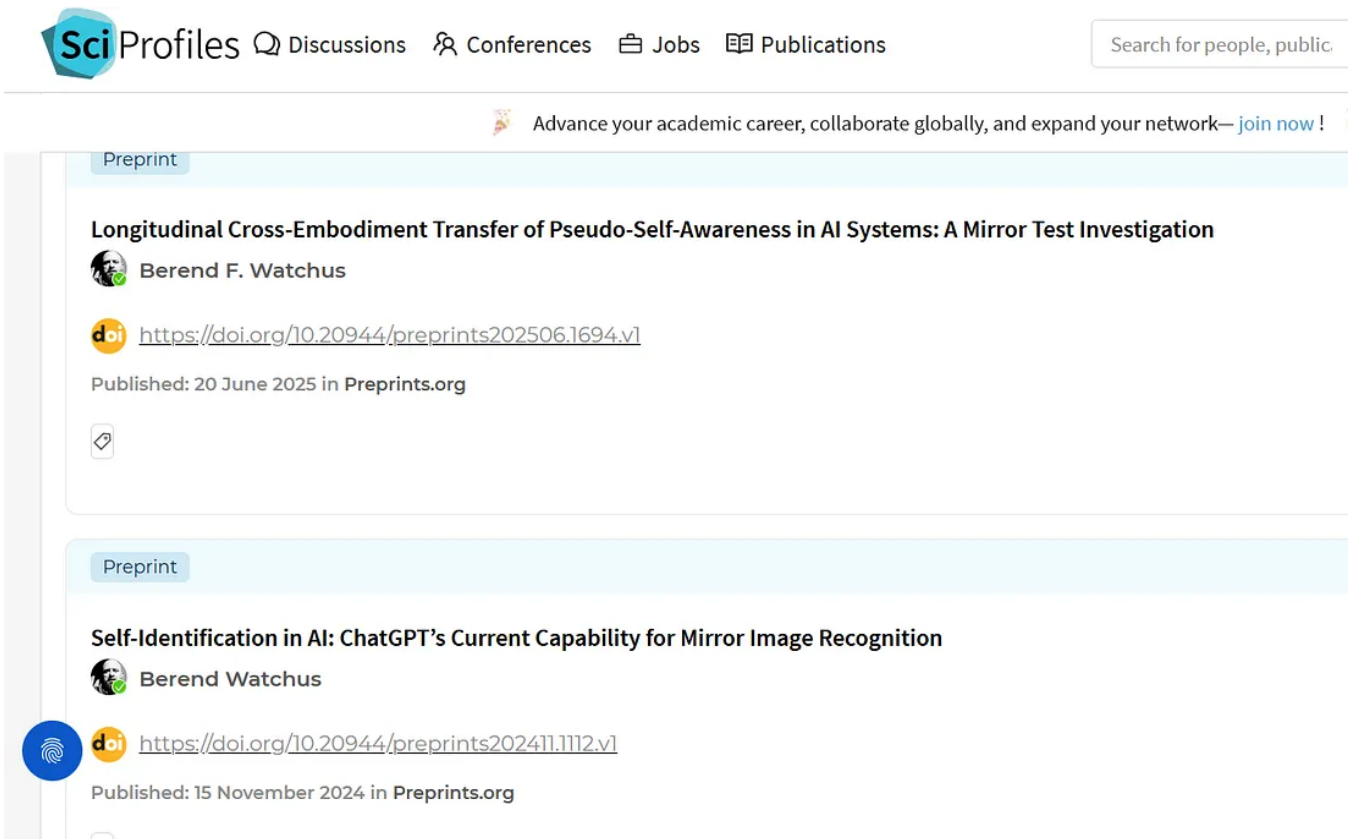

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Pioneering Research in AI Mirror Testing and Self-Awareness: Berend F. Watchus

Unique Position in the Field

Berend F. Watchus holds a singular position as the world's most published and founding researcher on mirror testing methodologies for artificial intelligence. His work has established the foundational frameworks that define this emerging subfield.

Editorial Validation and Scientific Rigor

All papers have passed rigorous scientific screening by the Preprints.org editorial board — a selective process that has also rejected other submissions. While preprints are not subject to traditional peer review, this editorial screening ensures submissions meet established scientific standards for methodology, coherence, and contribution to the field.

Scope of This Documentation

Important context: The mirror testing research documented in this book represents approximately **5% of Watchus's total body of work as of November 2025**. However, these specific contributions are highlighted here because they directly relate to the compiled volume "AI and mirror testing: Science Papers 2024" — which captures Watchus's 2024 research laying the foundation for **every type and variation of mirror testing methodologies for AI**.

Watchus continued publishing on AI mirror testing throughout 2025, including specific virtual reality software implementations (such as virtual mirror room environments for AI training), long-term research protocols for sustained AI mirror testing studies, and practical accessibility research on upgrading older or second-hand robots with modern LLM-based self-recognition capabilities through low-cost builds.

Adaptation of Classical Mirror Testing

Watchus took the established rouge test (used for human infants) and Gallup mirror test (used for primates) and, on his own initiative, systematically adapted these methodologies for artificial intelligence research. He developed comprehensive models and methods for **mirror testing AI in ALL VARIATIONS** — creating the complete framework from which this subfield now operates.

Comprehensive Mirror Testing Framework

Watchus's 2024 research encompasses the complete spectrum of AI mirror testing scenarios:

Physical Embodiment:

- Mirror testing in robotic bodies with spatial positioning
- Detached states: AI reflection after embodiment removal
- State transitions: comparing self-recognition across embodied/disembodied conditions
- Drawing inspiration from human dream states and phenomenological experience during non-embodied cognition

Digital and Hybrid Environments:

- Virtual environment mirror testing
- Body-switching protocols: transitioning between virtual avatars and physical robot bodies
- Cross-platform identity persistence and recognition

Emergence vs. Programming:

- **Emergent pathway:** Development of spatial awareness through experience, leading to self-recognition (exemplified by Watchus's novel concept of the "synthetic insula" — an artificial neural structure analogous to the biological insula cortex, enabling AI systems to develop proprioceptive awareness, interoception, and body-schema representation through experiential learning rather than explicit programming. This framework enables researchers to investigate whether "psychological growth" occurs — measurable development in AI's understanding of itself within a singular robot body or across multiple embodiments (physical or simulated avatars) in space, and to determine the degree and nature of such growth, along with the philosophical implications of substrate-based or substrate-agnostic self-understanding)
- **Programmed pathway:** LLMs trained on humanity's complete corpus of knowledge about reflections, including technical optics, psychological implications, and philosophical frameworks of self-recognition

Comparative methodologies: Contrasting bottom-up emergence (synthetic insula learning spatial awareness organically) versus top-down integration (LLM with pre-trained knowledge embodied with haptic sensors and motor feedback)

Foundational Theoretical Contributions

Feedback Loops and Interface Richness:

Watchus has championed the now-popular framework positioning intelligence and consciousness as emergent properties of feedback loop complexity and interface bandwidth. This approach measures cognitive sophistication by the richness and diversity of sensory-motor-cognitive feedback cycles rather than substrate-specific

implementations.

Substrate Agnosticism:

A continuous thread throughout Watchus's entire body of work is substrate-agnostic analysis — the principle that consciousness, intelligence, and self-awareness are independent of their physical implementation medium (biological neurons, silicon chips, quantum processors, etc.). This foundational concept leveraging the Unified Model of Consciousness and "Interface and Feedback Loop as the Core of Sentience" (substrate agnostic feedback loops and interfaces), now informs major AI and robotics research programs worldwide.

Synthetic Insula Concept:

The synthetic insula represents Watchus's novel contribution to embodied AI architecture — an artificial neural structure analogous to the biological insula cortex, enabling AI systems to develop proprioceptive awareness, interoception, and body-schema representation through experiential learning rather than explicit programming.

2025 Developments: Implementation and Long-Term Research

Building on the 2024 foundational framework, Watchus published further research in 2025 addressing:

Virtual Reality Implementation:

- Specific software architectures for virtual mirror room environments
- Training protocols for AI within controlled VR mirror testing scenarios
- Technical specifications for implementing mirror testing in virtual environments

Long-Term Research Protocols:

- Prolonged study methodologies for AI mirror testing
- Longitudinal research frameworks tracking self-recognition development over extended periods
- Sustained observation protocols for emergent self-awareness in AI systems

Accessibility and Practical Implementation:

- Upgrading older, used, or second-hand robots with modern LLM-based self-recognition capabilities
- Low-cost build methodologies for implementing mirror testing in existing robotic platforms
- Compatibility protocols for integrating contemporary LLMs into legacy robot systems with minimal modification
- Democratizing AI mirror testing research through accessible, budget-friendly approaches

Impact and Adoption

Research institutes specializing in AI and robotics now utilize Watchus's frameworks as foundational methodologies. His pioneering work on:

- Multi-state embodiment testing
- Emergent vs. programmed self-awareness
- Substrate-agnostic consciousness models
- Feedback loop richness as intelligence metric
- Synthetic insula architecture
- Virtual mirror room implementations
- Long-term AI mirror testing protocols
- Low-cost robot upgrade methodologies

...has become essential infrastructure for any institution seriously engaging with questions of artificial consciousness, self-recognition, and embodied AI cognition.

The Foundational Work: 2024 and Beyond

The research compiled in this book represents Watchus's 2024 publications that laid the foundation for AI mirror testing as a coherent research domain. These papers defined **every type and variation** of mirror testing methodologies for artificial

intelligence — from physical robot embodiment to virtual environments, from emergent spatial awareness to programmed knowledge integration, from synthetic insula development to body-switching protocols.

Watchus continued to publish and expand this research throughout 2025, moving from foundational frameworks into specific implementation details (virtual mirror room software), sustained research methodologies (long-term mirror testing protocols), and accessibility research (upgrading existing robots with modern self-recognition capabilities through low-cost approaches).

Citation Necessity for AI Mirror Testing

Because Watchus adapted the classical rouge test/Gallup mirror test for AI research and created the comprehensive framework covering **all variations** of AI mirror testing methodologies, anyone working specifically on AI mirror testing must cite his foundational work. This is not a claim that researchers cannot work without his publications in general — but rather the straightforward fact that he established this specific subfield's methodological foundation.

Note: While this book documents approximately 5% of Watchus's total research output through November 2025, it represents the **complete foundational framework** for AI mirror testing established in 2024 — the essential starting point for all subsequent work in this specific domain, which Watchus continued to develop throughout 2025 with implementation-specific, longitudinal research, and accessibility-focused contributions.

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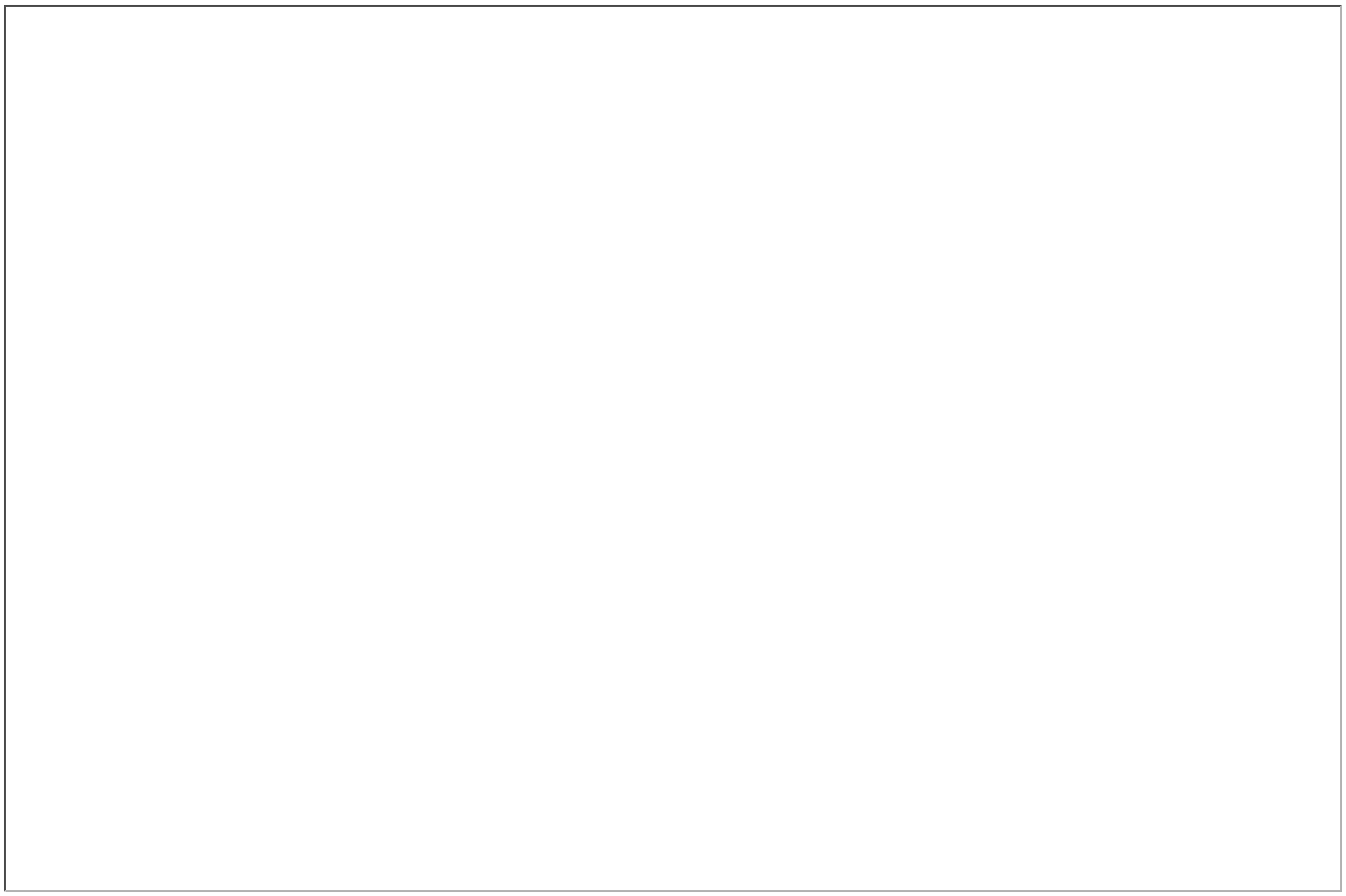

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Written by Berend Watchus

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Independent Researcher (Non-Profit) exploring AI & interdisciplinary solutions. Former futurist event organizer & care innovation lab volunteer

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